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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the Student Perceptions Survey (SPS), a simplified, pragmatic, and nontechnical approach to inventorying student needs and student perceptions of available help on the campus. A literature review on assessing institutional environments and the developmental tasks of college age students is provided. The SPS incorporates the perceptual format of environment assessment; a look at some of the major strengths and weaknesses of this approach is presented. The methodology of the SPS (sampling the population, designing the SPS, conducting the survey, and analyzing and reporting the data) is fully outlined. Two illustrative SPS report forms are included. (Author)

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INVENTORYING STUDENT NEEDS AND PERCEPTIONS OF AVAILABLE HELP: A SIMPLIFIED APPROACH

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Surveying Student Needs and Perceptions of Available Help: A Simplified Approach

Introduction

An overriding goal of student affairs has consistently been a sincere desire to meet student needs and to help with their concerns. Yet, instances of systematic inventorying and appraising of the performance level of the programs designed to meet this goal remain few. Perhaps as infrequent are campus surveys and studies of the effectiveness of related services as perceived by their users--the students.

A number of factors have prompted a careful review of how germane the services available to students really are. The increased heterogeneity of the campus population, outcomes of the recent student dissent era, expansion of nontraditional learning formats, and the additional pressure for institutional accountability can be mentioned as contributing items. Ironically, the call for a closer scrutiny of the efficacy of the delivery system and appropriateness of student services comes at a time when budgetary resources for conducting such evaluations are strained.

Some student affairs operations, of course, do conduct formalized and continuous assessment of their operation.[1] However, administrative appraisals of student services have also included a "seat-of-the-pants" approach, the use of "gut level" feelings and similar casual barometers. All divisions of student affairs should incorporate systematic samplings of student needs and student usage of and satisfaction with related services. This

information would be a valuable aid to student personnel administrators in making enlightened decisions about the quality and relevancy of their programing.

The major purpose of this article is to describe the Student Perceptions Survey, a simplified and nontechnical approach to surveying student needs and their perceptions of available help on the campus. First, a literature review on assessing institutional environments and the developmental tasks of college age students is provided. The perceptual format of environmental assessment, and some of its limitations and strengths, is then presented. Finally, the methodology of the Student Perceptions Survey (SPS) is outlined and two illustrative forms are included.

Review of Related Literature

This review of related literature will focus on two dimensions which are intricately connected with the development of the Student Perception Survey. The first part will deal with the writings on institutional environmental assessment; the last part will focus on college age developmental tasks.

Institutional Environmental Assessment

Within the past several years, researchers have generated a number of meaningful theories and formats to inventory and assess the campus environment (Baird, 1972-73; Hyne, 1973). Five selected theories of person/environmental interaction, responsible for some meaningful research on college students, have been reviewed by Walsh (1975). Astin (1970a, 1970b) has discussed the methodology of research on the impact of college, and Baird

(1974) has reviewed the practical utility of measures of campus environments.

Contrasting perceptions of the institutional environment are held by various constituents and have been documented in a variety of studies. Investigation into the differential perceptions of student personnel workers and students on the same campus has been conducted by Donato & Fox (1970), Gulliams & Dollar (1972), Noeth & Dye (1974), and Netusil & Hallenbeck (1975).

Several assessment tools and instruments have been used by institutions to measure student attitudes, interests, and needs. Benedict and Luciana (1975) have described Project PULSE which provides a rapid collection of student opinion data for decision makers at the University of Massachusetts. University Opinion Index is an information gathering system which solicits responses from undergraduates at the University of Rhode Island (Crafts, 1976). A telephone survey has been conducted at Ohio State University to inventory student needs and student personnel services (Carney & Barak, 1976). A report of student use of professional and paraprofessional services at Kansas State University has been prepared (Lynch and Sinnett, 1975). Winkworth, Bailiff, and Gaines, (1974) have produced a report dealing with undergraduate student perceptions at the University of California at Davis. The Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education has sponsored the preparation of a training manual for assessing and designing campus environments (Aulepp & Delworth, 1976), and an annotated review of selected literature on the topic (Kaiser & Sherretz, 1976).

College Age Developmental Tasks

Today, student personnel workers can reasonably anticipate many of the conflicts and confrontations that students will need to resolve during their collegiate experience. Havighurst (1953) developed the concept of "developmental tasks" to describe tasks that arise at or about a certain period in the life of individuals. The periods of late adolescence and early adulthood naturally affect a large number of students in American higher education.

Several definitions of the developmental task concept and different views of how it relates to the college age population have been made. Kenniston (1970) has developed the thesis of "youth" as a new stage of life. Chickering (1969) maintains that the developmental stage spanning the years from 18 to 25 is to be studied separately because the tasks of "the young adult" stage are substantially different.

Coons (1970) has postulated that five prominent developmental tasks are consistently encountered by students in their resolution of adolescence in college. Prince (1973) used Chickering's seven major vectors of development as part of a conceptual model for viewing developmental tasks. The Student Development Task Inventory[2] (Prince, Miller, and Winston, 1974) represents a sample of behaviors which young adults can be expected to demonstrate when they have satisfactorily accomplished designated developmental tasks.

Perceptual Approach to Environmental Assessment

Environmental assessment techniques can be classified under four major approaches: demographic, behavioral, multimethod, and perceptual (Menne, 1967). Researchers have developed formats that incorporate features of one or more of these approaches. Each approach, whether hybrid or not, have advantages and is encumbered with limitations.

Essentially, the perceptual approach usually involves responses to a series of descriptive statements that yield a global "picture" of an institution in terms of derived scales or factors. The perceptions of various groups may be compared. A roster of environmental assessment techniques that are commercially available has been compiled by Keating (1974).[3]

Techniques for the assessment of institutional-environmental variables have not been as well developed as the personality measures used with individuals. The majority of emphasis has been placed on assessment of inter-institutional dimensions. Yet, to improve student service programing on an individual campus, intra-institutional dimensions need to be inventoried as well (Baird, 1971).

Measures of student perceptions also have built-in limitations which taint the survey results with generality and vagueness. The ambiguity of what an aggregate perception of an environment means is a prominent restriction. Also to be noted is that the accuracy of perceptions about items being inventoried varies with the knowledge and experiences of the respondents. Factors such as the "rumor mill" and stereotyping are always operating (Baird, 1972-73).

Perceptual measures, regardless of their format or sophistication, may only reflect the perceived needs or perceived available assistance and not necessarily the actual situation. Students' reports may be biased or inaccurate due to an "image lag" or a tendency to overrate the institution or some segment of it (Centra, 1968).

Pace (1969) has countered some of these criticisms: ". . . Regardless of individual behavior, or assorted physical facts such as money or size, the environment, in a psychological sense, is what it is perceived to be by the people (students) who live in it (university community). Even if one grants the possibility of self-deception on a large scale, the perceived reality, whatever it is, influences one's behavior and response. Thus, realistically, what people think is true is true for them (p. 7)."

Perceptual measures do offer several unique advantages. These measures are quite sensitive to environmental change and a representative sample may not be a crucial prerequisite to getting a valid profile of an institution. Additionally, a cross-sectional or a longitudinal format may be used to study changes over a period of several years. Also, results based on perceptual data are relatively easy to interpret and understand. Overall, the perceptual approach to environmental assessment is the best developed, has demonstrated psychometric adequacy, and is the most widely used technique presently available (Hyne, 1973).

Student Perceptions Survey

The Student Perceptions Survey (SPS) has incorporated several of the features of the perceptual format. Use of the behavioral testing style is used to pose environmental items in action terms. The survey asks students about concerns and needs they personally experience and their perceptions of the availability of help on campus to resolve these encounters.

Methodology

A number of steps are involved in the development, implementation, and use of the Student Perceptions Survey. This section will discuss sampling the population, designing the SPS, conducting the survey, and analyzing and reporting the data.

Initially, an endorsement of the SPS project needs to be obtained from the constituencies most affected by its results--the student body and the student personnel staff. Publicity about the survey plan, including its purpose, procedures, and planned use of data, should be widely circulated in the campus media including the student newspaper. A SPS director with appropriate research skills needs to be selected to conduct and supervise the full project. An ad hoc committee, with staff and student representation, is to serve in an advisory capacity.

An early decision has to be made about the student population to be sampled (e.g., full-time undergraduates, transfers, graduating seniors). The focus and number of items that appear on the SPS will be affected accordingly. The data processing personnel on campus can write the program needed to draw desired stratified samples. If this service is not available, sampling techniques

outlined in a statistics book can be followed.

The scope of the SPS project needs to be determined. An agreement has to be reached about which areas of student needs to canvass. Possible items to appear on the student survey form should be nominated by staff who regularly deal with student services and programs. Input from student leaders and suggestions from the average "Joe College" and "Mary Coed" should be sought. It is important that survey items focus on pressures and strains now prevalent on the minds of students at the institution.

Items selected to appear on the survey instrument need to be grouped into appropriate clusters. Form 1.0, Student Perceptions Survey, is an illustrative compilation of statements that deals with student needs and concerns. The needs statements have been placed into five categories: career and vocational development, academic planning and programing, academic support and services, personal and social development, and maintenance and operations.

Insert Form 1.0 about here

The last category focuses almost exclusively on the off-campus dimensions of student life. The use of "student language" in phrasing items is important. An abbreviated roster of survey items dealing with one or two areas could be composed. Regardless of the concentration or length of the SPS instrument or the clientele surveyed, it should receive a careful review by the director and advisory committee. Pilot testing of the survey tool is recommended.

The procedure used to obtain survey data will be influenced by several factors including the sample size and composition and the budget allocated to the project. The use of campus and U.S. mail or a telephone survey may be appropriate for a small survey (i.e., under 200 subjects). The employment of student solicitors to contact the designated SPS sample is recommended, however. This procedure ensures a high rate of response and provides survey participants with the satisfaction of being involved in a project that may benefit them directly. An orientation and briefing session for student solicitors should be planned to acquaint them with the survey project and their role in it.

The time period for the completion of the student perceptions survey should probably not exceed one week. If student data reflective of the most recent academic period are desired, the survey should be conducted at the beginning of the new session. A "time-line" schedule of completion dates for all aspects of the SPS project needs to be delineated and closely followed.

For appearance purposes and efficiency in gathering and reporting survey data, the printing of the survey items on optical scanner sheets should be considered. The professional look of the instrument will reflect the importance of the project and the optical scanner hardware is already used on many campuses to score tests, evaluate courses, and register students.

Unless the SPS sample is very small, a manual tabulation of data should be bypassed in favor of computer analyses. Responses on completed survey instruments can also be coded for key punching, the costs of which are generally minimal (e.g., about $40 for a sample of 1000). Optical scanner sheets are processed so that the

data is automatically punched onto computer cards. More sophisticated inventorying formats that employ statistical analysis can be incorporated. Examples include a rating scale (e.g., Likert type) and sematic differential (e.g., opposite adjectives on a continuum). A number of prepackaged computer programs are available to statistically treat the data.

A format to report the survey data needs to be designed. Form 2.0, College Student Concerns, is one example. A breakdown of the percentage of respondents needing help on survey items is provided. Three terms are used to arbitrarily rate the perceived accessibility of help for respondents in their resolution of identified concerns and needs.

Insert Form 2.0 about here

A high rating (100%-75%) means that at least three out of four respondents perceived help to be accessible; a medium rating (74%-50%) means that at least two, but less than three out of four respondents, perceived help to be accessible; a low rating (less than 50%) means that less than two out of every four respondents perceived help to be accessible. The nearer survey results come to the percentage cutoffs, the closer the analysis needs to be made. While some arbitrariness exists in the assigning of these percentage cutoffs, it is believed that they do provide a rough feedback index of student perceptions of the assistance available.

A final descriptive report of the SPS project should be prepared for circulation or availability to interested parties. The document should contain an introduction, pertinent background information, outline of the methodology, compilation of data generated, and an interpretative discussion of the significance of the survey results.

Discussion

Certainly, many students do cope successfully with stressful situations through their own adaptiveness and use of informal resources including peer groups, family, and friendship networks. However, professionally staffed coeval services and programs brings added assurance that remedial-adjustive, preventative, and developmental help for students is available. The major goal of the Student Perceptions Survey is to generate data, based on student input, that reflects which related operations are functioning satisfactorily, need to be revamped, or possibly added.

The SPS is a simplified inventory approach, and as with any instrumentation that employs the perceptual format, has limitations. A prominent one is that the personal contact of the respondents with areas represented in the survey, are episodic and a one-time-only experience. However, the "eyes of the beholders (students)" remains paramount regardless of the level of accessible help agreed upon by staff members. Also to remember is that a negative perception of some survey items does not necessarily indicate that the aspects so rated are important to the respondents.

While identifiable developmental tasks do exist for the college population, their priority may shift with students' increased age and life experiences, and the continued influence of societal conditions. Added to these variables is the dimension that every college and university, division of student affairs, and campus clientele has its own ideosyncratic and indigenous qualities.

Therefore, annual surveys to gauge changes in student perceptions of available help are advised. The campus data can also be compared across time and with the results of similar national surveys (American College Testing Program, 1970; Hoyt, 1971). SPS results can be the topic for a division-wide staff meeting to allow for "in house" discussion and the development of reasoned recommendations. Suggestions based on survey data and generated from divisional analysis should then receive review at the administrative level empowered to implement adjustments.

Attempts to measure college environments have a mere 20-year history. Baird (1972-73) has suggested that most measures are atheoretical and global, and that there is little in them to help in pragmatic decision-making since they are not organized to lead to or evaluate actions. He has recommended that suitable instruments be developed that refer to specific aspects of the environment that can be changed by administrative actions. This also implies that instruments should be designed to include the opinion of students about matters affecting them.

The development of the Student Perceptions Survey is one attempt to provide a pragmatic format that can lead to organized, evaluative actions and decision-making. It is hoped that this

report on surveying student needs and perceptions of available help will bring attention to the importance of appraising related services and programs. A desired secondary outcome is that the availability of SPS will encourage the creation of similar environmental assessment tools.

NOTES

[1]Several formal research operations have been developed within divisions of student affairs. Noteable examples are Student Life Studies Office at University of Minnesota, Student Affairs Research and Evaluation Office at University of Massachusetts (Amherst), Office for Student Affairs Research and Evaluation at University of California, Davis, and Research and Evaluation Unit, University of Texas (Austin).

[2]A specimen set of the Student Development Task Inventory can be obtained from Student Development Associates, 110 Crestwood Drive, Athens, GA 30601, $5.00.

[3]Several widely used instruments that employ student perceptions as measures of college environment are the College & University Environment Scales (CUES), Institutional Goals Inventory (IGI), The Institutional Functioning Inventory (IFI), and the College Student Questionnaire (CSQ). These tools, used for institutional self-study and evaluation, are products of the Institutional Research Program for Higher Education.

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Form 1.0

Student Perceptions Survey

Directions: Please place an "X" in the appropriate square to the right of the following items. Do not sign your name on this form.

Sex		Year in College			Marital Status		Housing	
Male	☐	Fresh	☐	Junior ☐	Single	☐	On Campus	☐
Female	☐	Soph	☐	Senior ☐	Married	☐	Off Campus	☐

Below are statements used to identify student needs and concerns. You are asked to complete two parts of the survey. First, place an "X" in each square to indicate items with which you personally needed help during the last semester. Then, place an "X" in the yes or no square (to the right) to indicate your perception of the availability of help on campus.

College Student Concerns Categories		Needed Help	Availability of Help	
1.0	Career and Vocational Development		Yes	No
1.1	Clarifying career decisions	☐	☐	☐
1.2	Obtaining career counseling in major field	☐	☐	☐
1.3	Exploring alternatives to the college experience	☐	☐	☐
1.4	Finding full-time position after graduation	☐	☐	☐
1.5	Obtaining information about graduate/professional schools	☐	☐	☐
1.6	Finding part-time/summer jobs in anticipated career field	☐	☐	☐
1.7	Preparing job placement credentials, resume	☐	☐	☐
2.0	Academic Planning and Programing			
2.1	Clarifying educational goals	☐	☐	☐
2.2	Selecting an academic field of study	☐	☐	☐

College Student Concerns Categories	Needed Help	Availability of Help	
		Yes	No
2.3 Planning an academic major/ minor	☐	☐	☐
2.4 Obtaining adequate advising in major department	☐	☐	☐
2.5 Getting registered for needed classes	☐	☐	☐
3.0 Academic Support and Services			
3.1 Learning how to make good use of library resources	☐	☐	☐
3.2 Finding adequate places to study	☐	☐	☐
3.3 Designing an effective study schedule	☐	☐	☐
3.4 Getting help with class work-- tutoring	☐	☐	☐
3.5 Preparing written reports and projects	☐	☐	☐
3.6 Improving study skills (note-taking, reviewing materials)	☐	☐	☐
4.0 Personal and Social Development			
4.1 Dealing with drug-alcohol-related problems	☐	☐	☐
4.2 Resolving parental/family conflicts	☐	☐	☐
4.3 Obtaining marital (couples) counseling	☐	☐	☐
4.4 Resolving roommate hassles	☐	☐	☐
4.5 Developing social relations with different ethnic, social, cultural groups	☐	☐	☐
4.6 Getting professional help with sex-related problems	☐	☐	☐

College Student Concerns Categories	Needed Help	Availability of Help	
		Yes	No
4.7 Obtaining ethical/ religious guidance	☐	☐	☐
4.8 Finding identity as an individual	☐	☐	☐
4.9 Effective management of personal time	☐	☐	☐
4.10 Getting involved in campus social activities	☐	☐	☐
4.11 Opportunity to attend a variety of inexpensive entertainment (concerts, movies, plays, lectures)	☐	☐	☐
4.12 Opportunity to learn arts, crafts, and other hobbies	☐	☐	☐
5.0 Maintenance and Operations			
5.1 Finding suitable housing	☐	☐	☐
5.2 Getting information about municipal services/ community resources	☐	☐	☐
5.3 Obtaining consumer information about local merchants	☐	☐	☐
5.4 Qualifying for commercial credit, loans	☐	☐	☐
5.5 Budgeting and managing money wisely	☐	☐	☐
5.6 Adequacy of medical care facilities (hospitals, clinics)	☐	☐	☐
5.7 Arranging transportation to and from campus	☐	☐	☐
5.8 Adequacy of personal safety; security in campus area	☐	☐	☐

Thank You for your time. Please return this Student Perceptions Survey form to the student solicitor.

Form 2.0

College Student Concerns

Percentages of Respondents Needing Help
and
Ratings of Perceived Availability of Help

College Student Concerns Categories	Respondents Needing Help (Percentages)								Availability of Help (Ratings) *H=High M=Medium L=Low							
	Fresh (N=)		Soph (N=)		Junior (N=)		Senior (N=)		Fresh (N=)		Soph (N=)		Junior (N=)		Senior (N=)	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
1.0 Career and Vocational Development																
1.1 Clarifying career decisions																
1.2 Obtaining career counseling in major field																
1.3 Exploring alternatives to the college experience																
1.4 Finding full-time position after graduation																
1.5 Obtaining information about graduate/professional schools																
1.6 Finding part-time/summer jobs in anticipated career field																
1.7 Preparing job placement credentials, resume																
2.0 Academic Planning and Programing																
2.1 Clarifying educational goals																
2.2 Selecting an academic field of study																

*High(H) = 100%-75% Medium(M) = 74%-50% Low(L) = Less than 50%